

# Education, mental health, wildfire preparedness top list of concerns as 2016 Legislature convenes Monday

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Major election years usually translate to quick and easy legislative sessions, allowing politicians to avoid controversy and get back to fundraising.

But that may not be the case in Olympia when the Legislature opens its 2016 session Monday.

Members of each caucus have told constituents, lobbyists and the media they expect the 60-day session to be relatively breezy. But they sang that tune early last year before partisan gridlock and a series of special sessions took them well into the summer before “sine die,” or adjournment.

The Senate Republicans hold a three-vote advantage over the Democrats, while House Democrats have a two-vote advantage over their Republican colleagues. Both parties are eager to advance their agendas ahead of the election, even as they struggle to respond to a looming state Supreme Court deadline to reduce public schools’ reliance on local tax levies.

Democrats will be gunning for more legislative victories following a 2015 session in which many analysts saw Republicans ultimately succeed in pushing major parts of their agenda. Republicans will no doubt look for ways to push back against executive orders by Democratic Gov. Jay Inslee that seek to reduce carbon emissions while increasing revenue and actions announced last week to curb gun violence that otherwise never would have passed the Legislature with its current divisions.

A separate court order will also force lawmakers to deal with spending to adequately provide support services to mental health patients. There's also a broadly recognized need for more funding to address future wildfire suppression following record burns in 2015.

On the heels of the worst wildfire season in state history, Public Lands Commissioner Peter Goldmark is asking lawmakers for \$24 million for wildfire preparedness, including more equipment, training and fuel-reduction work. Goldmark says investing in advance is necessary to combat the growing toll of wildfires.

But finding the extra funds may be difficult, given that lawmakers also face a record-high \$165 million bill for fighting the 2015 fires when they only budgeted \$27 million.

While immediate drought concerns have eased, figuring out how to fund needed water storage, stormwater management, and flood control projects around the state remains a priority for Sen. Jim Honeyford, R-Sunnyside. A bill he sponsored last session to create a new state program to do just that will be back for debate again, but without the property tax he had initially proposed to fund it.

"The House has taken an interest in it and they've had hearings on it, so I'm hoping to sit back and wait to see what funding mechanisms they can come up with," he said.

### **Ongoing McCleary saga**

The big legislative issue in education — and arguably in all of Olympia — remains the ongoing McCleary funding saga.

The state Supreme Court's landmark McCleary ruling orders the state to fully fund basic education services. The Supreme Court ordered the Legislature to fulfill the requirement by the 2017-18 school year. Long story short, legislators added \$2 billion to education funding in recent years to reduce class sizes and purchase more equipment, among other efforts, but justices say they need several billion dollars more.

Bills introduced in both chambers Friday call for data from school districts to study how they are using their levy money, and would set aside money to analyze that information.

According to the regional Educational Service District 105, levy equalization funds accounted for almost \$49 million among schools in the Yakima area last year. The money makes up sizable percentages of several school district budgets — as much as 11 percent in some local systems. Superintendents have urged lawmakers to keep levy equalization levels at the current rate and avoid any cuts, further risking greater disparities among the richer and poorer districts.

Local school district superintendents also hope lawmakers maintain pace with the Supreme Court ruling, as the state's spending in 2018 will largely be determined by the 2017-18 biennium budget that will be produced next year.

In the 2015 session, the state allocated \$8,541 per student. However, McCleary says the figure should be \$12,701 per student for the 2017-18 school year. Progress must be made this session to get closer to the magic number, many Yakima Valley superintendents say.

Local school administrators here also say the state must bump up teacher salaries, as they currently rank last among West Coast states. Low salaries and low cost-of-living adjustments, they say, negatively impact teacher retention — whether they leave for a better-paying district or switch careers entirely.

Superintendents also told ESD 105 officials that the teacher shortage affecting school districts statewide must be addressed. Options recommended by the superintendents included modifying regulations so student-teachers can obtain temporary substitute teaching certification while student teaching. Another option is for greater state support for certification programs that can expedite teachers getting certification in severely needed areas like special education.

## **Mental health services**

In this short session, health care providers and industry leaders are focusing their priorities on mental health services.

The 2015 session saw some victories for mental health, but leaders want to be sure to maintain that momentum and not lose any ground this year.

Central Washington Comprehensive Mental Health CEO Rick Weaver said one important fix he'd like to see in 2016 is a restoration of state Medicaid capitation rates for mental health services. Last year, he said, some regions around the state were hoarding money in reserves rather than using it for services, and the Legislature responded by slashing rates across the board, which hurt regions like Yakima where money had already gone out to develop more services.

"The Legislature used a machete for something they should've used a scalpel on," he said. "They just punished everybody."

Comprehensive alone lost \$2 million a year, Weaver said. The rate comes in as a "per person, per month" amount for each Medicaid client receiving services.

To alleviate workforce shortages, providers hope legislators will direct some loan repayment money toward behavioral health professionals to encourage them to practice in underserved areas. Weaver said they also need new training programs to develop more counselors.

Spokeswoman Mary Kay Clunies-Ross at the state Hospital Association said they're also pushing for more funding for community mental health beds — psychiatric beds in local hospitals, rather than in dedicated psychiatric facilities like Eastern State Hospital.

"Folks are spending less time in the hospital for medical and surgical needs, so there is some capacity, but you can't just put a psych patient into a post-surgical room," she said. "They have different functionalities."

Other statewide legislation of local interest includes a proposed state Voting Rights Act that has gained more traction with each recent session. Last year House Democrats voted the bill out as one of their first acts of 2015, but it languished in the Republican-controlled Senate.

The new Yakima City Council, elected last year under a new system ordered by a judge under the federal Voting Rights Act, voted last week to make the legislation a priority for the city's lobbyist, Jim Justin. The city was previously monitoring the legislation but had no formal stance on it.

Proponents say the legislation would make it easier to change unfair elections systems in local jurisdictions without involving the courts, which in Yakima's case has resulted in more than \$1.1 million in legal defense costs. The city is also appealing the judge's ruling, which includes an order to pay the American Civil Liberties Union, which brought the lawsuit, some \$1.8 million.

California is the only state so far to have enacted similar legislation inspired by the federal law. Washington's legislation doesn't call for a specific type of elections system, but would allow local legislative bodies to work with locals to craft plans that may better serve the electorate.

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